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Staging the Easter Rising: Plays by W.B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey and Colm Tóibín

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Abstract

*The 1916 Easter Rising has given rise to many critical inquiries and occasioned heated debate among nationalist and revisionist historians. However, this historical event has been implicitly revered as the founding story of a nation in which all violence was justifiable if in the name of the common good. This paper will examine three plays that revisit the Rising and question the nationalist propaganda that implies that violence is a necessary evil, while also featuring the generally neglected participation of women in these events. These plays are Yeats's less discussed play *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) and Colm Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place* (2004). By illustrating women's quandaries and antagonisms, the plays either reflect on the causes and effects of remote English rule in Ireland or delineate the immediate impact of the Easter Rising on different social strata. Their alternative perspectives often feature the conflicting consequences of the Rising and illuminate ignored yet credible facets that may serve to rebut the received interpretations. There is a relatively long time span during which these works were produced, and the different social contexts in which the playwrights lived and worked give rise to diverse portrayals of the same political turmoil. These plays initiate a debate on the Easter Rising yet produce healing effects by restaging historical traumas.*

Keywords: Ireland--History--Easter Rising 1916; Abbey Theatre; Yeats, W. B. (William Butler), 1865-1939; O'Casey, Sean, 1880-1964; Tóibín, Colm.

Staging a historical drama can be a laudable and highly provocative act in that it invokes the dead to confront the living. Although a play may commemorate or condemn an event or a figure, it is plausible that the theatrical space brings the dead and the living into focus for the benefit of the spectators by illustrating the relationship between martyrs, followers and doubters. The 1916 Easter Rising has prompted a number of theatrical re-imaginings that question many inconvenient truths ('no previous Irish insurrection had been imagined in such avowedly theatrical terms').¹ Nevertheless, only a few scholarly explorations have scrutinized

¹ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 204. These dramas include: Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), W.B. Yeats's *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1931), Hugh Leonard's *Insurrection* (1966) and *The Patrick Pearse Motel* (1971), Margaretta D'Arcy & John Arden's *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* (1975), Tom Murphy's *The Patriot Game* (1991), Larry Kirwan's *Blood* (1993), Terry Eagleton's *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* (1997), Carlo Gebler's *Dance of Death* (1998), Colm Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place* (2004), Des Bishop & Arthur Riordan's *Shooting Gallery* (2005), Donal O'Kelly's *Operation Easter* (2006) and others.

the dramatic representations of the Easter Rising.² Showing how ‘co-habiting, surrogating or antithetical realities can feasibly coexist’,³ they profoundly intervene in the collective memory of the Easter Rising with a more disruptive force.

To illustrate how their re-creations can be ‘both innocent and dangerous, both a revel and a risk’,⁴ the three plays under discussion will examine the different rationales and sentiments apparent among the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, women and tenement dwellers involved in the Easter Rising and artists working for the Abbey Theatre. The plays being examined are: W.B. Yeats’s Noh play *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919); and Sean O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) and Colm Tóibín’s *Beauty in a Broken Place* (2004).

Yeats’s *The Dreaming of the Bones*: The Sense of Insecurity for the Anglo-Irish

Yeats’s *The Dreaming of the Bones*, written soon after the Easter Rising but not published until 1919 due to its political nature, reflects the playwright’s sense of insecurity about the Anglo-Irish presence in Ireland and his unease about the political upheaval. According to Andrew Parkin, Yeats took only three months to write this play, and ‘he must have been well enough pleased with the play, for it is one of his least revised works’.⁵

The protagonist, Dervorgilla (1108-1193), wife of O’Rourke, King of Breffny, was abducted in 1152 (or was perhaps a willing accomplice) by Diarmuid MacMurrough, King of Leinster, when her husband was on an overseas expedition. On his return, O’Rourke invades Leinster to exact his revenge, which results in Diarmuid’s appeal for help to Henry II of England. Diarmuid makes a promise to Strongbow, an English Lord, to reward him with Leinster in return for his assistance.

In his play set in 1916, Yeats does not endorse the young fighter who flees for his life after the Easter Rising, nor does he endorse Dervorgilla, who pleads for forgiveness for being a distant cause of the contemporary trouble. The play features the confrontation of the ghosts of Dervorgilla and Diarmuid with a young Irishman who is on the run in County Clare. The two ghosts, suffering the guilt of, ‘[selling] their country into slavery’,⁶ hope that their sin of lust can be pardoned. Without this pardon, they can neither kiss nor rest and would be isolated and lonely.

The young man is initially touched by their passionate yet bitter romance but is distressed by the fact that Irishmen had killed each other in the Easter Rising. He almost forgives the couple as a gesture to return their favour in helping him. Nonetheless, he is bound by a question: ‘if that crime were uncommitted / Had [Ireland] been most beautiful’.⁷

² Apart from journal articles, book chapters and doctoral dissertations, monographs focusing on dramatizations of the Easter Rising include William Irvin Thompson’s *The Imagination of an Insurrection* (1982) and James Moran’s *Staging the Easter Rising: 1916 as Theatre* (2005).

³ Eamonn Jordan, *Dissident Dramaturgies: Contemporary Irish Theatre*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 42.

⁴ Richard Pine, *The Diviner: The Art of Brian Friel*, (Dublin: UCD Press, 1998), 269.

⁵ Andrew Parkin, *The Dramatic Imagination of W.B. Yeats* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978), 61. Yeats’s *The Dreaming of the Bones* was written three years after the rising in 1919, whereas it did not premier until 1931 at Abbey’s Peacock Theatre. In a letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats said of this play, ‘I am afraid [it] is only too powerful, politically’. This might be the reason why the play could not be staged until sometime after Yeats had finished it. See W.B. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed., Allan Wade, (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 874.

⁶ W.B. Yeats, ‘The Dreaming of the Bones’, *Selected Plays*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares, (London: Macmillan, 1974), 118.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

Despite much struggle, ‘terrible the temptation and the place’,⁸ he abandons the despairing couple and moves on to safeguard his own future as an émigré.

This ending of the play is, to some extent, politically correct, given that the young nationalist does not sympathize with Dervorgilla and her lover and judges that they should suffer forever in Purgatory for their unredeemable crimes. This was in line with the 1917 ethos, in that it fulfilled the personal expectations of some nationalists: ‘Yeats knew the temper of Maud and of Ireland too well in the summer of 1917 to allow his fantasy of forgiveness and union to complete itself’.⁹ Some critics agree that the couple does not deserve forgiveness, since they are deeply mired in a ‘self-created winding of the labyrinth of conscience’.¹⁰ The play may have ended ‘politically, realistically and dramatically right’,¹¹ but the rejection of Dervorgilla’s appeal reveals how the young revolutionary accepts without question the doctrines of nationalist ideology. For him, forgiveness or reconciliation should never be considered because this could nullify all previous efforts his comrades have made for the love of Ireland.

Nevertheless, the essential tragedy for Ireland is not the Easter Rising itself but the legacy of sectarian violence that follows. On the one hand, the young man fails to transcend the limits of his ideological position but acts from obduracy and bigotry to make his judgements. On the other hand, the disappointment of Dervorgilla and Diarmuid corresponds to the sense of dislocation and insecurity felt by the Anglo-Irish ascendancy after the Easter Rising. The young revolutionary—with no name given—represents the group of diehard nationalists whose lack of charity and narrow thinking negated the various opinions of Irish republicans. Although the playwright seems to be neutral in his characterizations, it is clear that his concern for these emotionally-wounded protagonists is more for the sake of humanity in general. The ghosts of the couple and the young man are all swayed by the catastrophe of the Easter Rising and are unlikely to be healed if Irish society remains highly sectarian.

With the inclusion of some characters that wear masks, which is an element of *Noh* plays, *The Dreaming of the Bones* creates a perceptible distance between the historical figures and the audience, allowing the latter not only to observe the impingement of radical nationalism on individuals but also to reconsider when it is time (if at all) to heal this highly divided society. Yeats’s choice of the non-realistic Japanese *Noh* style to dramatize Dervorgilla’s story may have been due to his mixed feelings about the Rising.¹² He stated, ‘the realistic action does not permit that stilling and slowing which turns the imagination in upon itself’.¹³ In a letter dated 11 May 1916, Yeats expressed his feeling of being ‘very despondent about the future. At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned’.¹⁴

⁸ Ibid., 120.

⁹ Herbert J. Levine, ‘The Inner Drama of Yeats’s *Four Plays for Dancers*’, *Colby Quarterly* 16.1, 1980, 8.

¹⁰ A. Norman Jeffares, and A. S. Knowland, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, (London: Macmillan, 1975), 431, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-01076-9>.

¹¹ Parkin, *The Dramatic Imagination of W.B. Yeats*, 62.

¹² Yeats was fascinated by Japanese *Noh* plays. In an essay, ‘Certain Noble Plays of Japan’, published in April 1916, Yeats excitedly introduced a form of drama he had recently created: ‘With the help of Japanese plays translated by Ernest Fenollosa and edited by Ezra Pound, I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way – an aristocratic form’. W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 221, doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-00618-2_20.

¹³ Ibid., 529. Continuing this thread, Yeats published *Four Plays for Dancers* in 1920, consisting of ‘At the Hawk’s Well’, ‘The Dreaming of the Bones’, ‘The Only Jealousy of Emer’, and ‘Calvary’.

¹⁴ Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, 613.

Yeats dramatized Dervorgilla not so much to impress upon the audience that men are supposed to rescue fallen women from temptation or to qualify them as martyrs, but instead to understand their quandaries when they are subject to patriarchy. Yeats's use of the *Noh* style, which was an experimental theatrical expression for European theatre, further reinforced a profound concern for human existence since the playwright hoped to show, 'a deep of the mind' that 'can only be approached through what is most human, most delicate'.¹⁵

The next section will explore more closely the consequences of the Easter Rising by looking at how O'Casey's tragicomedy *The Plough and the Stars* realistically portrays radical nationalism sweeping through and subjugating the generally powerless Irish working class, and the antagonisms between women protagonists who are on different social strata.

O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*: From Non-rebel Viewpoints

O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* premiered at the Abbey Theatre in 1926. Despite the decade between the Rising and the play's production, its turbulence was still vividly remembered and the scars were still fresh. The 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty that created the partition of the Emerald Isle, followed by the Civil War, not only reinforced the divided memory of political communities but led to 'the effect of stifling re-evaluation of 1916 for many years'.¹⁶ *The Plough and the Stars* is controversial, therefore, because of its revelation of 'the awkward relationship between the terrorist and the freedom fighter' by exhibiting the unpleasant faces of nationalists, socialists and unionists, alongside how they were manipulated by ideologies.¹⁷ The play angered some in the audience who did not want their memory to be ridiculed but preferred to see the deceased revolutionaries as martyrs for the new state.

The Plough and the Stars is set before and during the Easter Rising in April 1916. Contrary to public expectation, the playwright did not portray the nation-defining event or the heroic deeds of the fighters occupying the General Post Office in central Dublin in any positive manner. Instead, the play deconstructed the public's perception of the revolutionaries by showing distressing yet often-ignored living conditions in the tenement houses of Dublin. Taken in by diverse political ideals and religious persuasions, not only are these tenement dwellers hostile to each other but many of the women are grieving for the loss of their sons, husbands and other relatives.

The audience and critics, including Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, along with other widows of deceased revolutionaries, were enraged by the depiction of the prostitute, Rosie.¹⁸ Her frivolous and sensual language and her jeers at male patriots, regardless of their political leanings, offended those who viewed the Easter Rising as a sacred object: 'If y'ass Rosie, it's heartbreakin' to see a young fella thinkin' of anything, or admirin' anything, but silk thtransparent stockin's showin' off the shape of a little lassie's legs!'.¹⁹ In addition to this

¹⁵ Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 224.

¹⁶ William Irvin Thompson, *The Imagination of an Insurrection: Dublin, Easter 1916*, (West Stockbridge, Mass.: Lindisfarne, 1982), 344.

¹⁷ Fintan O'Toole, 'Witnesses to history', *Irish Times*, 13 April 2006, accessed 22 February 2016, <http://archive.is/whyTs>.

¹⁸ Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington (1877-1946), founder of the Irish Women's Franchise League in 1908, was the widow of Francis Skeffington, who was mistakenly arrested and killed by British troops during the Easter Rising for being a rebel suspect, although he was a pacifist who was trying to prevent looting. She refused compensation for her husband's death and later became a hardline nationalist.

¹⁹ Sean O'Casey, *Three Dublin Plays*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), 186.

sexual distraction from the Rising, the audience was incensed at seeing the flag of the Irish Citizen Army carried into a public house by a group of drinkers. Many saw the presentations of looting and young Irishmen slaughtering each other in a quasi-war situation in Ireland as dishonouring the heroes of the rebellion.

Before the curtain fell, the audience was confronted by the fear of death that these young revolutionaries could not express: 'I tell you they're afraid to say they're afraid! [...] At th' barricade in North King Street I saw fear glowin' in all their eyes [...] An' in th' middle o' th' sthreet was somethin' huddled up in a horrible, tangled heap'.²⁰

According to Robert Lowery, during the first performance 'twenty women rushed from the pit to the stalls. . . . reaching the stage, where a general melee took place'.²¹ It would seem that the audience's attack on the actors was motivated by two kinds of violence. They denied the reality that O'Casey perceived and forbade others from expressing it, and the audience had been conditioned by the intellectual violence of nationalist propaganda; this also applied to Yeats and Lady Gregory, who insisted on continuing the production by calling in the police to guard the stage. Apparently, neither side was free from the intellectual violence they imposed on the opposite party.

One noteworthy scene in *The Plough and the Stars* is the reading of the 'Proclamation of the Irish Republic' by a silhouetted character who then promulgates disruptive yet romantic impressions of war to the young people: 'People in Ireland dread war because they do not know it. Ireland has not known the exhilaration of war for over a hundred years. When war comes to Ireland she must welcome it as she would welcome the Angel of God!'.²² Although the bloodstained depiction of the revolution is realistic, it may seem to the audience that the reading of the Proclamation serves to ridicule Patrick Pearse and his stirring discourses.²³ Specifically, Pearse, among other political orators, is known to have excelled in '[electrifying] Dublin with the rhetoric of his oration at the graveside of O'Donovan Rossa' and on various other occasions.²⁴ Although O'Casey does not explicitly state his judgement of Pearse, the silhouetted reader stirs an alienation effect that reveals how war heroes are made, particularly those who are eloquent in voicing extremist nationalist rhetoric. The violence that results from nationalist vehemence prompts the visibly pregnant Nora Clitheroe to run on stage looking for her husband during a scene brutality punctuated by a storm of shots. It is the weaker and more silenced and powerless sex that bears the consequences of militant nationalism.

O'Casey, who had lived through the fall of Charles Parnell and the Rising, might not have agreed that the Easter Rising should be poeticized as 'a terrible beauty', as Yeats ambiguously describes it in 'Easter 1916'.²⁵ He might have wanted to foretell that it could turn into a terrible mistake, given the consequential Anglo-Irish Treaty and the Civil War. He might have perceived that this mistake was the direct cause of the suffering of working class women due to political disputes.

²⁰ Ibid., 209.

²¹ Robert Lowery, ed., *A Whirlwind in Dublin: The Plough and the Stars Riot*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1984), 30.

²² O'Casey, 191.

²³ O'Casey's pastiche of the Proclamation is seen early in Act II: 'It is a glorious thing to see arms in the hands of Irishmen [...] Bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing, and the nation that regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood', *The Plough and the Stars*, 182.

²⁴ Róisín Ní Ghairbhí and Eugene McNulty, eds., *Patrick Pearse: Collected Plays*, (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2013), 1.

²⁵ Yeats, *Selected Poetry*, 93.

O'Casey also differentiated his women protagonists from distant historical figures, such as Cathleen ni Houlihan and Dervorgilla, by fleshing out his characters with vivid emotions and verbal expressions.²⁶ The characterization of his working-class women effectively counteracts the apotheosis of Mother Ireland. The ridicule of women in Irish myth is contributed by Covery, a socialist, who mocks how Fluther, a radical nationalist, is taught 'at his mother's knee to be faithful to th' Shan Van Vok', this being 'all dope' and 'th' sort of thing that workers are fed on'.²⁷ This typifies O'Casey's attitude towards the feminization of the nation (as Mother Ireland) and the stereotyping of women, and perhaps explains why he wanted to dedicate this play on the title page to 'the gay laugh of my mother at the gate of the grave'.²⁸

The next section will examine how Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place*, which was dedicated to the centenary of the Abbey Theatre in 2004 and written in a meta-theatrical style, incorporated alienation effects designed to be experienced by the audience. Tóibín's play draws on O'Casey's, not only by reconstructing the riot against *The Plough and the Stars* when it was first staged in 1926, but by also exhibiting the causes in a more objective manner.

Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place*: History in an Intimate Distance

By deconstructing nationalist heroism in a realistic style, *The Plough and the Stars* illustrates how memory can be taken advantage of and manipulated for political ends; the play offers a counter experience that unsettles the "axis of irreversibility" in nationalist history.²⁹ However, Colm Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place* moves beyond this binary mechanism of (counter-) memory through the device of meta-theatre that engages the audience with the problems of re-narrating the same historical event. Produced at the Abbey Theatre in 2004, *Beauty in a Broken Place* features the 1926 *The Plough and the Stars* riots in the same venue where they originally took place.

Beauty in a Broken Place debuted as part of the abbeyonehundred series, which commemorated the centenary of the Abbey Theatre. In part to pay tribute to O'Casey's controversial *The Plough and the Stars*, Tóibín's play reconstructs the fierce political wrestling between literary figures of the day and George O'Brien—a government representative on the Board of the Abbey Theatre. To keep the play from being banned, Yeats and Lady Gregory tried to persuade O'Casey to withdraw it and negotiate with O'Brien about offensive expressions and gestures that could be cut as part of a revision—even without seeking permission from O'Casey.³⁰

The play brings the playwright to centre stage by dramatizing his awkward interactions with Yeats, Lady Gregory, her servants, stage manager and actors, and provides a semi-biographical depiction of how the playwright challenged public memories of the Easter Rising. Notably, the audience, through the realistic portraits of characters and O'Casey's

²⁶ For instance, Bessie and Mrs Gogan, a unionist and a nationalist respectively, are often foul-mouthed against each other. For details, see the script on p. 192-3.

²⁷ O'Casey, 196.

²⁸ Ibid., 149.

²⁹ Tamar Kartiel, 'The past is Israeli Pioneering Museums', *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, eds. Dan Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg, (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1999), 100.

³⁰ The controversy over whether the *The Plough and the Stars* should be banned lies partially in the fact that in 1925 the Abbey Theatre started to receive an annual subsidy from the new Free State. The protesters could not put up with this hero-mocking play being performed in what was now a *national* venue.

monologues, can imagine how the Abbey Theatre was a political arena. Moreover, by giving down-to-earth characterizations of those key figures (for example: Yeats, Lady Gregory, F.J. McCormick, Lennox Robinson, George O'Brien, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and Maud Gonne), the play offers a more objective perspective of all the interest groups and their concerns.³¹ In challenging the nationalist historiography, *Beauty in a Broken Place* interrogates the political manipulation of the arts amid republican fervour, and explores the middle ground between idealism and harsh reality.

Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place* is quite different from O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* by virtue of its meta-theatrical style that uses a number of flashback scenes to reveal the darker side of O'Casey in his private life. For instance, O'Casey's motivation for writing this new play is not merely theatrical innovation. He states, 'Ah, feck the glory, give me the money',³² and in his eyes, Lady Gregory is more money-driven than artistic for, 'the idea of people paying to get into the Abbey made her happy'.³³ O'Casey himself, according to Tóibín's characterization, is barely respectable but skeptical with a sharp tongue throughout the play. This implies that his play(s) may be problematic and not fully impartial in terms of the issues concerning public matters, being imbued instead with his personal biases or opinions.

As for Lady Gregory, she is portrayed in *Beauty in a Broken Place* as overtly diplomatic and not always living up to artistic idealism. This is seen when she tries to persuade the young O'Casey to withdraw his play: 'You must write another play. Make it all characters and leave the ideas to Mr George Bernard Shaw',³⁴ since it, 'will offend our friends as well as our enemies'.³⁵

Although Yeats calls the police to the theatre and tells the rioters, 'you have disgraced yourselves again',³⁶ he actually finds his commissioning of *The Plough and the Stars* to have been a 'great mistake'.³⁷ In other words, in Tóibín's play Yeats does not appear genuine in his support for O'Casey but is acting as an Anglo-Irish politician whose outcry may be due to repressed resentment at the hero-worship awarded to the participants of the Rising.

Beauty in a Broken Place implicitly questions whether supposed memories of the past can be performed on stage, and to whom and to what extent. Strategically, the play leads its 2004 audience to imagine how the audience in 1926 reacted to the Easter Rising of 1916, while it also demonstrates how the public's perception could be determined by a director and other production members exercising power over the script, the cast and a chosen accent.³⁸ For each of the expected stage effects, the audience members are able to see, during the flashbacks, how stage instructions not in the script are added at will by the director.

Notably, the generations of 2004 and 1926, and those in between, may be introduced to different re-imaginings or reconstructions of the Easter Rising. Interestingly, Tóibín once criticized Christopher Murray's *Sean O'Casey: Writer at Work* by saying that 'the

³¹ The death of Lady Gregory's only son, Robert Gregory, killed during the First World War, is mentioned twice in the play (see pp. 32 and 76). This may prompt the audience to compare the shared grief of Lady Gregory and Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington, both of whom had lost beloved family members but were antagonistic to each other due to the staging of *The Plough and the Stars*. However, most male historians do not mention the shared grief of these two prominent ladies. They explain their antagonism as having political origins.

³² Colm Tóibín, *Beauty in a Broken Place*, (Dublin: Lilliput, 2004), 5.

³³ Ibid., 6.

³⁴ Ibid., 5.

³⁵ Ibid., 11.

³⁶ Ibid., 51.

³⁷ Ibid., 46.

³⁸ For the accent training, see the script on pp. 10-11.

reconstruction of a self was done by the reinventing of one',³⁹ but Tóibín himself may have invented another one that is yet to be publicly evaluated. To a significant extent, *Beauty in a Broken Place* put women more in the foreground than many other texts that have documented the Rising have done.

The dilemma that women faced during this event is visualized in dramatic form by having one actress play two or more roles, particularly characters who are rivals. In the production, Lady Gregory and Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington are played by one actress; Mrs Yeats, Nora and Rosie the prostitute are played by another; and Maud Gonne and three other roles are performed by a third actress. Such casting, if not creating confusion in the audience, can lead to a distancing effect as it visualizes opposing values in society. In the same manner, the role of Yeats is double-cast with that of F.J. McCormick, who always mutters lines he personally dislikes,⁴⁰ and the role of O'Brien the censor is paired with that of Mr Shields, who insists on unfurling the flag of the Irish Citizen Army. The juxtaposition of these conflicting values and characters consequently prompts a dialectic so that the audience members can form their own personal perspectives. Most importantly, they are reminded that history can be determined by multiple factors but only selected memories tend to be guarded by the interested parties.

Conclusion: Embracing A Neglected Memory

The three plays under discussion were written across a considerable timespan, but they are each concerned with the causes and consequences of the Easter Rising. This may testify to Homi K. Bhabha's argument that 'historical time' does not exist 'outside fictional space', but the two lie 'uncannily beside each other'.⁴¹ This explains why the theme of the three plays has recurred with degrees of variation over the past century.

The three playwrights tried to counteract the mainstream memory of historical incidents by staging more thoughtful interpretations of the issues and roles under debate. Their alternative perspectives challenge the Irish nationalist myth, to varying degrees in that they have aimed, 'both to unite and to differentiate them[selves] from their neighbours'.⁴² Notably, as observed by F.S.L. Lyons,⁴³ the plays illuminate the inherent problems of divided memories whose 'great enchantment' could make a preferred historiography 'so much more congenial than reality'.⁴⁴ In order to unearth the inconvenient truth, the three plays reveal how heroism is shaped through different modes of narrative under self-censorship so as to justify its ideological violence.

Notably, the three playwrights, with concerns for the political crises of their own times, broadened the limits of what can be imagined by questioning the public's memory of

³⁹ Colm Tóibín, 'A Complex Personality', *Irish Times*, 20 November 2004, accessed 15 May 2016, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/a-complex-personality-1.1167377>.

⁴⁰ F.J. McCormick (1889-1947) was an actor who played several roles in O'Casey's plays, including *The Plough and the Stars*. In *Beauty in a Broken Place*, he appears to be hostile to O'Casey and often skips or mutters lines that would be offensive to the audience.

⁴¹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The World and the Home', *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. A. McClintock and A. Mufti & E. Shohat, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 447.

⁴² Jonathan Githens-Mazer, *Myths and Memories of the Easter Rising: Cultural and Political Nationalism in Ireland*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 8.

⁴³ Desmond Fennell quoted this from F.S.L. Lyons's broadcast in 1971. See Desmond Fennell, 'Against Revisionism', *Irish Review* 4, 1988, 20.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

the Easter Rising, and suggesting that painful and divided memories can be healed only if one's 'self-improvement . . . results in self-realisation' of the inconvenient historical truth.⁴⁵

In terms of the characterization of women, no woman in the three plays is delineated as a maiden or a crone, and none even slightly resemble the image of Mother Ireland. Specifically, Dervorgilla in Yeats's plays is given flesh and bones, and is significantly able to voice her emotions and opinions, despite having been blamed by male historians for being the cause of the invasion from England. One may argue that Yeats attempted to excuse their Anglo-Irish presence in Ireland by getting Dervorgilla to wish for forgiveness from the villagers and the young revolutionary in their plays. However, the playwrights had had conventional Victorian upbringings and were cautious of the public's reaction to such a sensitive issue, thus their attempts to channel the audience into Dervorgilla's feminine world were groundbreaking. Her explanation of why she eloped from a forced marriage arranged, without her consent, by patriarchal men suggests the misogyny in a radical nationalist culture in which a female betrayer must be publically identified and punished. His play can thus be regarded as implicitly feminist, and as revealing the fact that the Irish Question was first asked by Irish men as a domestic and ethical issue, rather than a colonial or international one.⁴⁶ In other words, it was only by coincidence that Dervorgilla became a scapegoat in patriarchal politics. Although her story is tragic, Irishmen in Yeats's work seem too proud to forgive her in any respect but confine Dervorgilla to a subservient and demeaned condition.

O'Casey and Tóibín continued Yeats's efforts to break the nationalistic stereotype of Irish women. Notably, and regardless of whether or not they are supportive of the causes and legacy of the Easter Rising, some women characters are sharp-tongued and aggressive. For instance, Nora in *The Plough and the Stars* hardly comes across as a member of a weaker sex but is more courageous than some of the men in walking through a continuous hail of bullets; Rosie the prostitute openly demands her right of discourse: 'I'm a woman, anyhow, an' if I'm a prostitute aself, I have me feelin's'.⁴⁷ In Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place*, women rioters cannot be more defensive about who they are in terms of the Easter Rising: 'it is how we remember. And how we remember defines more than anything else who we are and who we will be'.⁴⁸

However, Tóibín ends his play by having O'Casey imagine 'what it might have been if the English had never set foot in Ireland. . . . I suppose they would have gone on . . . making heroes out of idiots, half-savages locked into darkness. And they were still locked into darkness'.⁴⁹ It seems that Tóibín is more concerned about the ensuing violence, which brought parochialism and inhumanity to Ireland, than he is about sectarianism. As a whole, the three plays disclose how Irish people have been frustrated by the memory of the Easter Rising, as none of the protagonists can escape unscathed from this 'inept tragedy of errors'.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Peter Kush, 'Writing "Easter 1916"', *That Other World: Supernatural and the Fantastic in Irish Literature and its Contexts*, (London: Colin Smyth, 1998), 4.

⁴⁶ Some revisionist historians have pointed out that there was a gap of fourteen years between Dervorgilla's elopement (or abduction) and the English invasion. Some suppose that Dervorgilla's love affair is too romantic to believe and was never documented in official annals but only in folklore. For these arguments, see Arthur E. Clery's 'Irish History from Within', and F.X. Martin's 'Diarmait Mac Murchada and the Coming of the Anglo-Normans'.

⁴⁷ O'Casey, 197.

⁴⁸ Tóibín, *Beauty in a Broken Place*, 69-70.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁰ Fintan O'Toole, '1916: The Failure of Failure', *16 on 16: Irish Writers on The Easter Rising*, ed. Dermot Bolger, (Dublin: Raven Arts, 1988), 42.

When Pearse read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in front of the General Post Office, he envisioned an ideal society, free from violence, with gender equality and no sectarianism. Although the plays discussed above are critical of the intellectual and physical violence that shaped the Emerald Isle, the deceased revolutionaries did not encourage self-pitying, but ultimately cared for freedom and humanity amid any political crisis. At the centenary of the Easter Rising, this is the kind of memory that should be recalled and celebrated without shame.

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